

## **“Those who Dream . . . Persevere (Epiphany)”**

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Barbara Brown Taylor has noted how the story of the Magi ranks right up with the Christmas and Easter stories in terms of snaring the human imagination. Whether it is through various artist renderings, the words of poets about their visit, or just the fact that they always appear, without fail, in every Creche scene, we seem to know their story well. But as Taylor also notes, so much has been made of this story about which we know so little. If we follow Matthew’s account what we know is they were Magi, not kings, and there were not three of them. In truth, we don’t know exactly where they came from or how many there really were. We don’t even know whether there were women on the journey with them. Neither do we know how long the journey took or how old Jesus was when they arrived.

But, you see, all that we don’t know is not the point. The point is the story itself. And the story can be true whether the archeology backs it up or not. And this is quite the story. On the one hand, this is a beautiful story about the mysterious and ever-persistent ways of God to appear to all humankind, regardless of culture, geography, or religious tradition, that they might bear witness to the divine. But, on the other hand, it is also the story of a journey that discloses the power of a dream.

Having one epiphany—that of the star, which led them to Jesus and overwhelmed them with joy so that they could do nothing but bow down in worship and adoration—is quite a lot. But these Magi received not one but two epiphanies. Their second epiphany, or showing, was the divine intervention that came to them by way of a dream. Although the Magi did not themselves perceive Herod’s deception, it was known to God and given to them in a dream, which they honored and trusted, returning home by another way.

Fr. Richard Rohr has said that “an epiphany is not an experience that we can create from within, but one that we can only be open to and receive from another. Epiphanies leave us totally out of control, and they always demand that we change.” Neither epiphany received by the Magi was created by them. Both were given to them by God—through the star that guided them to Jesus and brought them overwhelming joy—and through the dream that warned them of the danger that lie with returning to Herod and required them to return home by another road. Both epiphanies also left the Magi out of control. The star led them on a journey and to a destination and a person they could have never imagined. And the dream demanded that they change their plans and find another route back home.

How does Rohr’s insight that epiphanies leave us “totally out of control” and “always demand that we change” sit with you? Does it make you identify more or less with the Magi? Does it spur you to openness to an epiphany from God or does it make you hesitate more about where you’d like to receive one or not?

Maybe you are thinking, as I am, of all of the unrequested epiphanies we received in 2020. So many showings and appearances from the twin pandemics of racism and COVID-19. Many of us didn't and still don't know up from down for all of the epiphanies of the past year. We have felt so much out of control. And there has been so much that has had to change and still needs to change.

Dr. Marcia Riggs, who has provided commentary and reflections for our Those Who Dream series we started in Advent and conclude today, with Epiphany Sunday, has this wisdom for us: "The imperative of Epiphany today is to receive all of God's dreams: warnings, assurances, and projections about how to persevere during this pandemic. The initiatives and commitments to God and others about how to flourish will surely come to us in our dreams."

I think Dr. Riggs is on to something. I want to suggest that we must consider the epiphanies from last years' pandemics, that are still with us today, as warnings and insights from God as to how we might collectively and individually go home by another road. Or, as Rohr says it, how we must change.

Church—we must change. We cannot claim the overwhelming joy of adoring Jesus of Nazareth, a poor ethnic and religious minority who lived with his back up against the wall, as the Empire sought to destroy him from his earliest days to his prophetic adult ministry—and not the warnings from God that tell us how we follow Jesus must change—that having had this encounter of overwhelming joy with Christ, we must now go home by another road.

Consider this: the Magi were sent home by another road so as not to expose Jesus and his family to the hatred and violence of Herod and the Empire. Had they ignored the dream and gone to Herod, they would have, presumably, had blood on their hands. And so, to avoid that, to protect Jesus from early death before it was his time, their plans, their regularly scheduled travel route, had to be disrupted. And those Magi might just have faced some minor inconveniences because of this. We don't know, but it might have made their own journey more dangerous or longer or more uncomfortable.

As products of Western Christianity, we have inherited a racialized faith that is at cross-purposes from God's desire to join us with those not like us. Many of us have lived largely segregated, in both life and in worship, from folks of color and the plight of those with their backs up against the wall. Whether we have been aware of it or not, there is an invisible yet powerful caste system in our country that is designed to benefit, above all others, those who have received an arbitrary racial label of white, and to oppress those who have been racialized as anything but white. This couldn't be farther from God's intentions for humanity or the shalom of God's kingdom that Jesus came announcing and enacting in his ministry on earth.

Friends, without heeding the warnings of God, without a willingness to go home by another road, we risk missing out on discovering what following Jesus might mean for our role in

undoing racial injustice. I believe that we, too, like the Magi, must go home by another road. We cannot ignore the systemic racism in our country or the way that it has played out in our denomination, presbytery, and yes, even our congregation. To ignore it, to turn a blind eye, or to decide to feel powerless about it, is as good as walking straight back to Herod in Jerusalem and giving away Jesus' identity and location.

There have been too many epiphanies about racism in just 2020 alone for us to not heed them. Heeding these epiphanies will make us, as white folks, feel out of control. We will have to work through our white fragility. We will have to be made uncomfortable and inconvenienced. We will have to learn to take a new route to get home. My hope is that through continual epiphany experiences of overwhelming joy at the person of Jesus, God with us in the flesh, we will find the courage and vision to make this new journey together on this new road. That we might be, as civil rights leader John Lewis said, "ordinary people with extraordinary vision" willing to get in "good trouble, necessary trouble" and to "put away our willingness to profit from the exploitation of others." May we persevere in dreaming the dreams God has for the flourishing of all. And may we heed the dreams from God that warn us to take another road home. Amen!